

Idaho Wines Are No Small Potatoes

By Roger Fillion, December 15, 2015



Idaho is said to be at a turning point, as far as size and quality of wine. Credit: Copyright 2015 Matt Green

because the wines coming out of Idaho are on the rise and getting better and better.”

Idaho is famous for potatoes. Now the state’s swelling ranks of winemakers want to put Idaho’s wines on the culinary map. So far, they appear to be making headway.

Just ask Andy Perdue, wine writer for the Seattle Times and editor and publisher of the website Great Northwest Wine. He compares Idaho’s wine making with that of its more famous neighbor, Washington.

“They’re kind of at a place where Washington was in the early to mid-’90s as far as size and quality. That was the turning point for Washington. It’s an interesting time to keep an eye on that industry,

The rising quality

Perdue links the rising quality of Idaho wine to people such as Leslie Preston. The Idaho native found Idaho’s grapes “so exciting” she decided years ago to make wine using them. Small problem, however: She was living in California’s Napa Valley. “I just wanted to focus on Idaho grapes,” Preston recalls.

The University of California, Davis-trained enologist concocted a plan: Truck Idaho grapes to Napa, where she’d make the wine. That raised eyebrows among Napa winemakers. Their reaction, when her truck of Idaho grapes rumbled into Napa: “OK, here comes the spud wine.”

Preston remained a “road warrior” for four years, before she and her family relocated to Boise in 2012. Today, Preston owns Coiled Wines, in the Snake River Valley grape region in southwest Idaho (hence the name “Coiled,” as in snake). And Preston – who trained in California at Clos du Bois, Saintsbury and Stag’s Leap Winery – is among several Idaho winemakers winning awards.

A jump in wineries

“Idaho is more than just potatoes,” Moya Shatz Dolsby, executive director of the Idaho Wine Commission, says. (Full disclosure: The commission was among the Idaho-based sponsors funding my trip.)

Idaho counted 51 wineries at year-end 2015 – versus 11 in 2002. More than 1,300 acres of grapes are planted. The principal whites are Chardonnay, Riesling and Viognier. The chief reds are Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Merlot, Malbec and Tempranillo. Idaho’s wine production in 2014 ranked 19th nationwide, according to federal data.



Idaho now has 51 wineries, versus 11 in 2003. Credit: Copyright 2015 Matt Green

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The Snake River Valley, with well-draining soil and good temperatures, is perfect for vineyards. Credit: Copyright 2015 Matt Green

“We know we can make world-class wines here,” winemaker Melanie Krause, owner of Cinder Wines, says. “The desert climate grows wonderful grapes.”

Approved in 2007, the Snake River Valley American Viticultural Area was Idaho’s first federally designated wine grape growing region. It’s also Idaho’s main grape region. The Eagle Foothills, within the Snake River Valley AVA, became Idaho’s second AVA in November. The Lewis-Clark Valley, 270 miles north of Boise, near Washington, is expected to win federal designation soon.

Perfect for growing grapes

The Snake River Valley was formed more than 4 million years ago, a product of volcanic activity and floods that left well-draining volcanic soil, industry officials say. The elevation ranges from 1,500 to 3,000 feet.

Summer temperatures hit the 90s during the day and plunge to the 50s at night. That cold-hot combination helps balance the grape sugars and acids, industry officials say. They liken the Snake River Valley AVA to Washington’s famed Columbia Valley.

“You’re going to find wines here that are incredibly balanced and very drinkable,” Krause, an Idaho native, says.

Idaho’s wine industry dates to the 1860s, when grapes were planted in north central Idaho. They were among the first planted in the Pacific Northwest. Idaho’s pioneer winemakers were two Frenchmen and a German. Their wines garnered awards around the country.

But Prohibition halted wine making. While states such as California and Washington resumed production after Prohibition’s repeal in 1933, Idaho’s wine business was morbid. Religious conservatives put a damper on alcohol consumption.

An ‘influx of talent’

Wine making didn’t revive until the 1970s, when growers planted grapes in the Snake River Valley. Ste. Chapelle, Idaho’s oldest and largest winery, was founded in 1975 and produced wines from there.

An influx of winemakers who learned their trade elsewhere — like Preston of Coiled and Krause of Cinder, a former assistant winemaker at Washington’s Chateau Ste. Michelle — helped the industry. “That’s really what the industry needed – an influx of talent,” Perdue, the wine writer, says.

But for now you must visit Idaho to sample its wines, or order them online. A limited number are at restaurants and on store shelves outside Idaho. Most wineries are small. Growers are planting grapes.





Ste. Chapelle, Idaho's oldest and largest winery, was founded in 1975. Credit: Copyright 2015 Matt Green

Perdue recommends several wineries:

Coiled Wines in Garden City, outside Boise/Dry and sparkling Riesling
Cinder Wines, in Garden City/Tempranillo and Syrah
Sawtooth, in Nampa, about 20 miles west of Boise/Petit Syrah and Rosé
Koenig Distillery & Winery, in Caldwell, about 25 miles west of Boise/Ice wine
Fujishin Family Cellars, in Caldwell/Mouvedre
Clearwater Canyon Cellars, in Lewiston, in northern Idaho/Merlot

He's bullish on the future: "I could see the industry doubling again in the next five to 10 years." That could mean more wine for oenophiles who don't live in Idaho.

Main photo: A wine lover snaps a photo of a Cinder wine, from one of Idaho's well regarded wineries. Credit: Copyright 2015 Matt Green

